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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses trends in instructional technology and distance education (ITDE). The most notable trends are the lack of funding and resources for technology training, the lack of administrative support for ITDE issues, and faculty who are reluctant to adopt technology and distance learning. This paper identifies seven emerging trends as well: First, financial aid regulations will become more favorable for distance learning institutions. Currently, college programs that do not work under semester, trimester, or quarter systems must deliver at least 12 hours of class work per week in order to qualify for federal student aid programs. Known as the 12-hour rule, the regulation has been criticized by online-education groups. The Education Department has proposed changing this regulation, allowing students to interact with their professors online in lieu of time on campus. Second, creating classroom communities through interactive communication will become a key component to successful online learning. Third, orientation courses or materials will be widely used prior to students participating in online learning. Fourth, mentors will assist faculty in online learning programs and courses. Fifth, mentors will assist students in online learning courses and programs. Sixth, course tools such as WebCT and Blackboard will drive themselves out of business, and seventh, work with instructional technology will count toward tenure and promotion. (Contains 20 references). (Author/NB)

Running Head: TRENDS IN ITDE

Trends in Instructional Technology and Distance Education

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Trends in ITDE

There are several trends in instructional technology and distance education (ITDE) which have been persistent. The lack of funding and resources for technology training, the lack of administrative support for ITDE issues, and faculty who are reluctant to adopt technology and distance learning are the most notable. However, there are seven issues which are currently emerging as important trends in ITDE.

1. Financial aid regulations will become more favorable for distance learning institutions.

Presently, college programs that do not operate under semester, trimester, or quarter systems must deliver at least 12 hours of class work per week in order to qualify for federal student-aid programs (Borrego & Carnevale, 2002). Known as the 12-hour rule, the regulation has been criticized by online-education groups who say it prevents institutions from developing new methods of teaching, such as self-paced instruction (Carnevale, 2002). Additional restrictions include the limitation on the institutions that no more than 50 percent of their courses can be offered online, and no more than 50 percent of their students can take these online classes (Alvarez, 2001).

The Education Department has proposed changing this regulation through legislation that would allow colleges to do away with the 50 percent requirements so long as they maintain a loan-default rate of less than 10 percent for the previous three years. In lieu of 12 hours a week on campus, students would spend at least one day a week interacting with a professor, either face-to-face or at a distance (Alvarez, 2001). The bill

passed The House of Representatives in October, 2001 and is supported by the Bush administration. The Senate has yet to vote on the bill (Alvarez, 2001).

Online education and virtual universities are becoming staples in the education arena. They fill a need of the American public; therefore, the American public will exert influence on their representatives to make financial aid available to the students of these universities.

2. Creating classroom communities through interactive communication will become a key component to successful online learning.

Interactive communication includes "reflection papers, active discussions, with the instructor and with class peers, taking leadership roles in presenting what has been learned, mentoring, coaching, problem-solving, and a myriad of forms of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation" (Lynch, 2002, p. 4). When instructors place an emphasis on class discussion, in part by including discussion in the grading of the course, students contribute to discussions which create a sense of classroom community (Rovai, 2001). In a recent study, two of three factors that influenced student satisfaction were an instructor who interacts frequently and productively with students and a constructive and dynamic discussion between students and their peers (Swan, 2001).

Therefore, interactive communication will become part of the fabric of successful online courses. Courses that are "data dumps" of old lecture notes scanned or word-processed into Web pages will suffer from lack of student interest and poor student reviews. Students are customers, and the customer will demand a rich, interactive learning environment.

3. Orientation courses or materials will be widely used prior to students participating in online learning.

Attrition rates in distance education garner much attention and concern (Carr, 2000). Are there solutions to the high dropout rate for distance education students? McVay (2000) found that when students participated in online orientation courses, attrition was reduced by more than 50%. The Duke University-East Carolina University Partnerships for Training project developed a five-step approach to avoiding technical problems for those who are enrolled in a Web-based course, including providing computer skills practice during orientation classes (Short, 2000). However, Lynch (1998) stated that an orientation for Internet/distance learners needs to include how to learn in the Internet/distance environment.

The concept of taking an orientation course in the learning mode in which the course will be conducted seems exceedingly logical. Students would have the opportunity to become familiar with the learning environment, the tools, and the methods of communication in a guided environment, rather than "live" while taking a class, perhaps a credit bearing class. Not only would the student benefit from the orientation class, but any faculty members in whose classes the student would enroll would also benefit from having a learner who is comfortable and familiar with the learning environment.

4. Mentors will assist faculty in online learning courses and programs.

To prepare faculty to teach online classes, institutions should provide faculty mentors who are seasoned online instructors. If faculty members have someone to guide

them, they can easily learn the techniques necessary for delivering an exciting, interactive online course (Coulter & Armao, 2001). Mentors should be made available to both new online instructors and experienced online instructors. Faculty mentors can help both experienced and new online instructors with basic technical problems and questions. Mentors can also help the new-to-online instructors learn to establish online student communities and use the Internet to enhance classroom activities (Faculty Mentor Program, 2002).

5. Mentors will assist students in online learning courses and programs.

Mentors should be available for students, as well. The staff of Florida State University's Office for Distributed and Distance Learning (ODDL) use mentors for four undergraduate degree programs that began online in 1999. Mentors monitor student participation levels. If a student does not engage at least weekly with the course material, the mentor will email the student. If there is no response, he or she will call the student to follow up. Throughout the duration of the course, the mentor serves as the student's guide and, in some cases, motivator (Mullane, 2002). A difficult issue for online instructors is not having the benefit of reading facial expressions or tone of voice of their students. It is difficult to identify who is bored, displeased, or distracted. It would be very taxing to expect online instructors to "keep tabs" on each student when he/she disappears from an online course for days at a time. The student mentor could help keep students motivated and focused while freeing the faculty member to focus on the content of the class.

6. Course tools such as WebCT and Blackboard will drive themselves out of business.

Over the past decade, several course management systems (CMS) have become popular, particularly at colleges and universities. These programs do not require the user to know any programming languages, and they provide the ability to present course materials, conduct communications both live and through email, and maintain grades. Two such programs have emerged as top choices for CMS: WebCT and Blackboard (Young, 2002c). Both WebCT and Blackboard used to charge nominal fees of "a few thousand dollars a year," but in late 2001/early 2002, both initiated pricing changes that increased the cost to institutions by tens of thousand of dollars to hundreds of thousands of dollars (Young, 2002c).

Now that Blackboard and WebCT have established themselves comfortably as the top CMS choices, their greed will spur on the Open Knowledge Initiative (OKI). A group of universities is collaborating on OKI, a project that plans to design a free course management system whose source code will be made publicly available (Young, 2001). The project is being monitored by college administrators who hope the forthcoming software will be a possible alternative to Blackboard or WebCT (Young, 2002b). While Blackboard and WebCT may be comfortably on top now, it is simply a matter of time and market economics before they are dealt the financial blows that will cripple them.

7. Work with instructional technology will count towards tenure and promotion.

Traditionally, teaching, research, and service are the pieces of the tenure puzzle at universities and colleges across the United States (Young, February 22, 2002). An effect of the emphasis on research publication is that many instructors are unwilling to put the effort into developing technology-based teaching approaches (Bates, 2000). Colleges are

slowly beginning to consider professors' work with technology in tenure decisions (Young, 2002a). From small universities (Katz, 1997) to large professional organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English (CCCC, 1998), the incorporation of technology into teaching is being measured in decisions regarding promotion and tenure. Without such recognition, faculty may not have the incentives or motivation to expend the time and effort to learn new technologies or incorporate them into their teaching.

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